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ABSTRACT

The reading laboratory has been developed to supplement intensive reading work for adult foreign students developing English-as-a-second-language skills at the American Language Institute. The laboratory is designed to suggest to students that there is a variety of reading tasks and a variety of reading strategies related to the tasks, to offer the individual student an opportunity to practice these tasks and strategies at the level and pace best suited to his own reading ability, and to build reading confidence. Emphasis is placed on reading for information. No undue pressure is put on the student to increase his reading rate as an end in itself. A presentation introducing a new strategy in the laboratory lasts about 30 minutes and is followed by exercises. Finding suitable materials poses the biggest problem; materials must be self-correctional so that students may proceed at their own pace. (Author/VM)

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EXPERIMENTS WITH AN ESOL READING LABORATORY

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EXPERIMENTS WITH AN ESOL READING LABORATORY

We live in a literate society. Before you can cross the road safely, drive on a expressway,or even let yourself off the bus you must be able to read. Any intelligent approach to the plethora of packaged goodies available in every supermarket presupposes, first, the ability to read the advertisements and prices and then the ability to read the instructions about what to do with your trove -- freeze it or thaw it, bake it or boil it. History hardly has time to happen before appearing first as newspaper headlines and then in the definitive paperback form, which is immediately discussed and assessed in a variety of journals, professional and non-professional. A scholarly hardback then appears, to be followed by more reviews, revelations and letters to the editor. In case we feel we are keeping up with all this there are a variety of announcements on all the mass media to assure us that we are not; this is the information explosion, we learn, and only he who can read all about it at many thousands of words per minute can hope to survive.

Into this ordinary, everyday, literate life comes the student from overseas. It is in an attempt to lessen the entry shock and help him to use his powers of literacy to the fullest extent that the reading laboratory has been set up at the American Language Institute.

The Institute Student

As the reading laboratory has been set up very specifically for the Institute's students, let us first consider who these are. The typical Institute student is a young adult newly arrived in the USA from one of the developing nations. He has come to the States to study, usually a technical subject, and comes to the Institute to acquire English as a study tool. He is financed by some U.S. government agency, a sign of his success and standing in his home community which must not be obscured by his inadequacies in English.

The individual levels of English skills are as varied as the student population. This is true both of the skills required to operate the spoken language and the skills required to operate the written language. Moreover, our entrance tests indicate that we may not equate these skills or assume that a student who scores well in a listening comprehension test will also score well in a reading test. Nor may we assume that, where the skills differ in standard, those skills which operate the written language will be the better developed.

Even where little is known of the background of any student, we may safely assume that his skills in hearing and speaking his mother tongue are as fully developed as are those of a native speaker of English hearing and speaking English. I think, however, that we may not assume that his skills in reading his mother tongue are as fully developed as are those of a native reader of English reading English. There are various possible reasons for this. The student may come from a basically non-literate society where he is not required to read as a part of everyday life, and reading materials are not readily available. He may be first-generation literate, unaware of his full potential as a literate being. He may come from a tradition of oral learning, where study means the rote memorization of a limited corpus of material and its exact reproduction as a proof of learning, rather than wide, critical reading. If any of these possibilities is true, his attitude toward the printed word may be one of reverence, a feeling that the printed word is somehow final, sacrosanct, beyond criticism and assessment. Any or all of these circumstances may interfere substantially with his reading skills in English.

If we add to these possibilities the certainty that the student is insecure, both in the English language and the American culture, we begin to see how difficult it is to assess his reading ability when he comes to the American Language Institute.

It is very much easier to define the target reading ability, the reading ability the overseas student will need in his life and studies in the U.S. This is nothing

less than the ability to cope with the same quantity and quality of reading material as a native American student does.

The First Approach: Intensive Reading

It seems that the non-native reader can approach the native reader's ability in two ways: one way, intensive reading, can perhaps most clearly be defined as the traditional areas of work of the reading class -- the visual and perceptive skills, the lexico-semantic skills, the organizational skills, the skills of selection and inference and conclusion which are all part of the complex skill of reading. These intensive skills, which have long been under discussion and investigation, are not part of my brief today, and I do not intend to discuss them. I must, however, point out that intensive skills have always been a part of the Institute's classroom program, related on the one hand to work on syntax and usage, on the other to written exercises; the teacher has always dealt with this approach to the reading process in his own classroom, and continues to do so.

The Second Approach: Reading Strategies

But there is a second, complementary, approach. The competent native reader, who must handle large quantities of sometimes difficult material, has more than these intensive skills at his disposal. He has command of certain reading strategies, or plans of attack, which, I believe, he uses more consciously and selectively than he does his intensive reading skills. An analogy with driving helps to introduce the idea of reading strategies to students; to get the best performance from your automobile you select the speed and the gear best suited to the conditions under which you are driving. No one expects to roar up a steep winding road in high at seventy miles per hour, or creep along the expressway in low. Similarly, the good native reader is able to define the purpose of any reading task, assess the reading materials for difficulty and then select the pace and strategy best suited to his purpose -- a fast

skimming for the general meaning, a rapid scanning for a fact or a more detailed study of a text. Because he can do this he can probably read faster and with better comprehension than the reader who is not able to make these judgements and selections.

Many native readers of English who have reading problems attend special courses exactly to learn reading strategies; it seems reasonable that the non-native reader who has reading problems should try following the same approach. It must be remembered, however, that the non-native reader has difficulties peculiar to him. He is not reading in his mother tongue. He is almost certainly apprehensive about the language in which he has to operate his reading strategies, and finds it difficult to look beyond the barrier of language to the strategy. Moreover, he is often convinced that his main reading problem is a lack of vocabulary, and that the solution to this problem lies in the bilingual dictionary and the compilation of long, bilingual wordlists. Even students who have been weaned from excessive dependence on their dictionaries will frequently say that their main need is vocabulary; when left to select their own material for work in the laboratory, many students, particularly when they first arrive, will head straight for the texts which contain the most, or the most overt, work on vocabulary extension. The average student at the American Language Institute does not have the confidence in his own reading ability to allow him to look beyond the level of the word to the level of the text as a whole.

It is also interesting to note that none of the Institute students appears to have acquired reading strategies for his mother tongue. Of the two hundred or so students who have attended the reading laboratory since it was set up five months ago, only one has shown any previous knowledge of the idea of reading strategies of any kind; he had gained this knowledge not through reading in his mother tongue, but as a student of English at the American University of Cairo.

Purposes of the Reading Laboratory

Yet difficult though reading in English may be for the Institute student, he must read, and he must read with some degree of speed and ease if he is to survive

as a normal student on a normal U.S. college campus. The reading laboratory was set up at the American Language Institute not to replace the intensive reading work, which continues to form part of the regular classwork of every student, but rather to extend this work by adding a new dimension to it. The specific aims of the reading laboratory are:

i. to suggest to the student that there is a variety of reading tasks;

ii. to present a variety of reading strategies, and show how these relate to various tasks;

iii. to offer the individual student an opportunity to practise these tasks and strategies at the level and pace best suited to his own reading ability;

iv. to build reading confidence.

Assignment of Students to the Reading Laboratory

Because of the nature and function of the American Language Institute program, students may join or leave classes on any day; this somewhat unusual circumstance affects the structuring of all the courses presented at the Institute, including those in the reading laboratory.

On arrival at the Institute, the student takes tests in listening comprehension, reading and vocabulary. The original intention was to assign students to reading laboratory groups on the basis of their reading and vocabulary scores; this proved to be administratively difficult, and it now seems probable that such a procedure would not in any case be the best one, a point which will be taken up again below. Students are therefore assigned to the reading laboratory by class groups based on overall scores; they attend the laboratory twice a week, for an hour each time.

Introduction to the Reading Laboratory

In order that the new student in the laboratory should realize how the purpose of the laboratory differs from the purpose of the regular intensive reading class,

an introductory explanatory unit was devised, using a tape and programmed workbook. When this unit was first prepared, it concentrated on the mechanics of reading -- eye span, fixations, regressions and so on -- and on the necessity to increase reading speed. This did not prove a very helpful introduction, for a number of reasons; the ideas were new and rather bewildering to the student, especially as they involved a number of new technical terms; there was a lack of suitable follow-up materials of this kind for use in the laboratory; students appeared not to generalize from the mechanical exercises to real-life reading tasks. This introductory unit has therefore been reworked to provide a much more practical presentation of the work of the reading laboratory. The emphasis has been changed from the mechanics of reading to the purpose of reading, and the relation of purpose to pace in any reading task. It is suggested to the student that reading may, quite abritrarily, be broken down into four main kinds: reading for survival, which means reading street signs and instructions and maps and so forth; reading for information, which is probably the most frequent type of reading; reading for detailed study, such as is required at school or university; and reading for pleasure, in which category are included novels, poetry, drama and much of the material which the student may have come to associate with the reading class. The second kind of reading, reading for information, is the area on which the work of the reading laboratory concentrates. In this introductory unit the student is given short preview exercises in some of the reading strategies, such as scanning and reading for the central idea, which he will practise in the laboratory.

Later Laboratory Procedures

On his second visit to the laboratory the student is made familiar with the materials, and give a personal work record, which he is asked to fill out every time he attends the laboratory, so that, in a constantly changing community, both

he and the teacher have a record of the work he has completed. These personal work records, along with all the completed worksheets and so on, are kept in the laboratory.

Because of the fluid nature of the laboratory groups, progressive presentation of new work is not possible; presentations are therefore made in a cyclic manner, with the rate determined by the composition of the laboratory group. For example, in the spring when students tend to stay for a longer period at the Institute, there might be only one presentation every two, or even three sessions, whereas in the summer, when there are more students and the length of stay is often shorter, there might be a presentation every session. These presentations, which usually last about thirty minutes, introduce new reading strategies: how to survey materials, either in book or periodical form; how to use the SQ3R technique; skimming; scanning for a fact; reading for the central idea. The student is expected to attend at least one presentation on each of these strategies and work the follow-up exercise; he is, of course, free to attend the next presentation of the same topic but is rather encouraged to seek out further materials giving practice in that particular strategy and concentrate on doing the task rather than hearing again about how to do it. The student is also urged to discriminate among the strategies and materials offered, and to devote the bulk of his time and attention to those which he feels to be specially relevant to his life and needs.

No undue pressure is put on a student to increase his reading rate as an end in itself, since many students evince a fear that any attempt to increase their reading speed will inevitably result in a total loss of comprehension. It is rather pointed out how an increase in reading rate comes about by the use of the right reading strategy for a given reading task. Nonetheless, each student is given material on which to determine his reading rate -- which is often well below 100

words per minute -- and encouraged to try to improve it by working selected exercises which include comprehension checks. Similarly, the student who wants to work on vocabulary extension is directed to texts which first demonstrate, through comprehension checks, that the main ideas of the text can be understood even though not every word is understood and then offer contextualized vocabulary exercises. It is hoped in this way to strengthen reading confidence and to lead to the notion of comprehension through context rather than by instant, constant recourse to the dictionary.

Areas Under Special Observation in the Reading Laboratory

None of these techniques of teaching reading is particularly new or innovative; most of them have for some time been in use in study-training centers, rapid-reading courses and the like both in this country and elsewhere. The innovative aspect of the work of the reading laboratory at the American Language Institute is that the students are not native readers of English. All the techniques and materials which have proved suitable as means of improving the reading skills of native readers have therefore to be retested for their suitability for non-native readers. Results at the reading laboratory so far seem to indicate, among other things, that there should be much less emphasis on speed for the non-native reader, but that the idea of reading strategies is a useful one, provided that suitable materials for practice can be provided. Materials designed for native readers are not frequently suitable for non-native readers largely because of their high cultural and lexical load. One of the greatest difficulties so far has been to find materials for this type of reading training designed for the non-native reader, especially if he has anything other than "intermediate" ability in English -- we have found very little available for either the very advanced or the pre-intermediate student.

Materials in Use in the Reading Laboratory

The materials which are most widely used in the laboratory are Harris' Reading Improvement Exercises for Students of English as a Second Language and Yorkey's Study Skills for Students of English as a Second Language. These are supplemented, to some extent, by parallel exercises, at a higher or lower level, produced at the Institute. All of the other books presently in use in the laboratory were initially designed for native readers; parts of them are useful for certain students, but these parts must be carefully selected, and are limited to use by the more advanced student. It is important that materials for laboratory use should be self-correctional so that students may proceed at their own pace; not all the materials available contain answer keys.

Three sets of the SRA Reading Laboratory are in use: IIa, IIIb, and IVa. These are useful because of their format and versatility, and also because of the variety of exercises they offer. However, they are designed for American children; the topics are chosen to interest children, the cultural load is high, and the vocabulary sometimes quite exotic for the non-native reader. Students are urged to be selective in their use of the exercises on the cards; they are advised to complete all comprehension and vocabulary exercises, but only such other exercises (on spelling, stress, noun-compounding and so on) as seem challenging to them. To students from Francophone Africa, for example, many of these latter exercises offer few difficulties and therefore few learning opportunities; to students from Korea, on the other hand, they may offer a new and extending task. Students in the reading laboratory are asked to fill out a report sheet on each card they complete, rating its interest, difficulty and usefulness for them; in this way we hope to be able to identify any sections which seem to be universally problematic for the non-native reader, or sections which present problems to non-native readers from specific linguistic or cultural backgrounds.

Sometimes an advanced student may spend a prolonged time at the Institute. In that case he is encouraged, when he has worked the main corpus of laboratory texts,

to bring to the laboratory material from his own discipline and apply to it the techniques he has learnt in the laboratory. He might, for example, survey a text book or professional journal, skim a report of a meeting or read a chapter of a book in a limited time and then give an oral report on it. In this way the teacher has an opportunity to observe the student carry over into something like a real-life study situation the skills which he has practised in the laboratory.

Problems in the Reading Laboratory

While the lack of a variety of suitable materials has been the main difficulty so far, there have been others. One was the problem of a suitable locale in which to hold a reading laboratory. A permanent room is essential; ideally it should be equipped with a number of booths for individual work, a conference table where the teacher can work with students to whom new material is being presented, bookshelves, a blackboard and a large clock with a second hand. If listening facilities are also available in the booths, a certain amount of taped material, such as instructions on the use of a workbook, with timed pauses in which specific reading tasks should be completed, could be used, thus freeing the teacher for other tasks.

A number of procedural problems have emerged, many of which are the result of our constantly changing student population; a more general one, however is how to allow a student the freedom of choice and pace implied in the term "laboratory" while yet ensuring that he is not limiting himself to a small area of work, perhaps well within his own ability range.

But the most basic difficulty has been to identify the students for whom work in the reading laboratory was suitable. It was originally thought, as mentioned above, that this could be done by using the entrance test vocabulary and reading scores. However, it presently became clear that if a student's listening comprehension scores were low he was unable to benefit from work in the laboratory, even if his reading scores were above the cut-off point. This seemed to be because

he was unable to follow oral presentations or instructions, and consequently did not know how to handle the reading tasks assigned to him. It must be remembered that this is a laboratory situation, with up to twenty-five students working on various individual projects, not a class working in lockstep; the student must have the oral/aural ability to participate in presentations and discussions and follow instructions. If a student is not able to grasp the purpose behind the work of the laboratory, understand what he is being asked to do and make a reasonable attempt at doing it, attendance at the laboratory may have a negative effect, reinforcing poor reading habits and lack of confidence. For the student with a sufficient overall level of language ability, however, the reading laboratory seems to provide a useful and enjoyable way of extending and strengthening his reading skills.

Conclusions

Few absolute conclusions can be reached in the field of reading experiments, least of all in five months. Yet some findings from the work of students in the reading laboratory do seem possible. Most of the American Language Institute students have reading rates, in English, which are far below the rate expected of an average American college student. Undue concentration on speed of reading, as in phrase-flashing exercises, seems to increase apprehensiveness and have little carry over to real-life reading situations. The concept of a variety of reading strategies for different reading tasks is a new one for most students; there seems to be little help in this area from mother-tongue reading habits. Yet most students find these strategies comprehensible and workable, and seem to be able, to some degree, to practise them in an appropriate real-life situation, with a consequent speeding up of their reading rate in that specific situation. Students seem to find practising reading strategies interesting and satisfactory, and this

helps to build confidence in their own reading ability. Reading passages which offer checks of general comprehension and encourage the use of context as a clue to meaning also serve to increase confidence. Care must be taken, however, to select from the wide range of materials suitable for native readers only those suitable for non-native readers, and to ensure that the students who attend the reading laboratory are linguistically able to take part in and benefit from the work they do there.

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